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THE AFGHAN TALIBAN: EVOLUTION OF AN ADAPTIVE INSURGENCY

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THE AFGHAN TALIBAN: EVOLUTION OF AN ADAPTIVE INSURGENCY

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Throughout their twenty-five-year insurgency, the Afghan Taliban have evolved from a small group of madrasa students, mujahedeen fighters, and tribal Afghans into one of the most innovative and adaptive insurgencies in modern history. As a result, the U.S.-declared War on Terror in Afghanistan has persisted for eighteen years as the Afghan Taliban continue to threaten regional security and stability. In 2019, renewed Taliban peace talks with the U.S. may be an indicator for optimism, but the historical patterns in Taliban strategy and ideology demand caution. The U.S. government has repeatedly underestimated the sophistication, innovation, and resiliency of the Taliban. This thesis examines how the Afghan Taliban's strategies and ideologies have evolved since 1994 when the group became an explicit political and military entity. Broken into distinct time periods, this thesis chronologically investigates the history of the insurgency using the following lenses: Afghan identity, the spread of transnational terrorism, tactical innovation, and political ingenuity. Outdated and over-generalized counterinsurgency doctrine led to millions of American deaths in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Success of future doctrine requires applied awareness of cultural complexities and adversarial behaviors. Agility, speed, and responsiveness must become major tenets of counterinsurgency planning moving forward.

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THE AFGHAN TALIBAN: EVOLUTION OF AN ADAPTIVE INSURGENCY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout their twenty-five-year insurgency, the Afghan Taliban have evolved from a small group of madrasa students, mujahedeen fighters, and tribal Afghans into one of the most innovative and adaptive insurgencies in modern history. As a result, the U.S.-declared War on Terror in Afghanistan has persisted for eighteen years as the Afghan Taliban continue to threaten regional security and stability. In 2019, renewed Taliban peace talks with the U.S. may be an indicator for optimism, but the historical patterns in Taliban strategy and ideology demand caution. The U.S. government has repeatedly underestimated the sophistication, innovation, and resiliency of the Taliban. This thesis examines how the Afghan Taliban's strategies and ideologies have evolved since 1994 when the group became an explicit political and military entity. Broken into distinct time periods, this thesis chronologically investigates the history of the insurgency using the following lenses: Afghan identity, the spread of transnational terrorism, tactical innovation, and political ingenuity. Outdated and over-generalized counterinsurgency doctrine led to millions of American deaths in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Success of future doctrine requires applied awareness of cultural complexities and adversarial behaviors. Agility, speed, and responsiveness must become major tenets of counterinsurgency planning moving forward.

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I. INTRODUCTION

American military planning for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was built upon the belief that the bearded mullahs of the Taliban and al-Qaeda could not effectively challenge the power of a modern military for more than a few months. To an extent, the U.S. assumption was correct. The Taliban suffered significant losses and retreated into the mountains of Pakistan in early 2002. However, the Taliban had risen to power in Afghanistan based on their ability to adapt, innovate, and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Strengthening the Taliban narrative of resiliency, they re-emerged in Afghanistan two years later, prepared to defeat U.S. forces with revolutionized tactics and refined ideologies.

This thesis examines how the Afghan Taliban's strategy has evolved since 1994 when they became an explicit political and military entity. Throughout the Taliban's history, they have adapted in numerous ways to further the objectives of their insurgency. This thesis examines the Taliban's strategies during five distinct time periods beginning in 1994 and ending in the present day. Afghan identity, the spread of transnational terrorism, tactical innovation, and political ingenuity provide lenses for which this thesis develops a comprehensive analysis of the Taliban's evolutionary nature.

A. RELEVANCE

On September 18, 2001, President Bush signed a joint resolution authorizing retaliation against those responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Operation Enduring Freedom commenced just a few weeks later with a significant bombing campaign targeting known terrorist locations throughout Afghanistan. At the same time, U.S. Special Forces, in coordination with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, waged an extensive assault on the ground.

Prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban controlled nearly 90% of the country. After just two months of intense conflict, the U.S. and Northern Alliance coalition had pushed Taliban forces and al-Qaeda leadership into the mountains of Tora Bora and

had toppled the Taliban regime within the country. Recognizing their losses, the remaining members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership escaped across the border into Pakistan.

Considering the rapid elimination of Taliban forces as a major military success, U.S. policymakers turned their attention to preparations for the ensuing invasion of Iraq. Just one year later, in 2003, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld declared an end to major combat operations in Afghanistan.[1] These actions indicate the U.S.'s fundamental misunderstanding of the resiliency of the Taliban insurgency.

Meanwhile, the Taliban had been studying American military tactics, developing powerful new narratives, and innovating destructive new techniques to counter advanced American weaponry. Upon their return to Afghanistan in 2004, the Taliban led devastating assaults on coalition forces and changed the tide of the war in favor of their insurgency.

An extensive understanding of the Taliban's ability to adapt and innovate against a variety of adversaries is vital to the development of future U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. This thesis provides one analytical study of the Taliban's adaptability, but the complexities of this particular topic could provide material for dozens of books on counterinsurgency strategy.

B. METHODOLOGY

To examine the evolution of the Afghan Taliban's strategy since 1994, this thesis will utilize four key lenses to evaluate Taliban actions throughout several specific time periods spanning from 1994 to 2019. The first lens this thesis uses to examine Taliban adaptations is Afghan identity. As several ethnically and politically influenced militias fought for authority during the violent Afghan civil war, the Taliban regime rose to power based on a unified nationalist identity. The Taliban's ability to create a broader identity that appealed to large portions of Afghans despite differing ethnic and tribal affiliations is the most significant strategy used by the Taliban from 1994 to 1996.

[1] Vernon Loeb, "Rumsfeld Announces End of Afghan Combat," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2003, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/05/02/rumsfeld-announces-end-of-afghan-combat/9507f2f8-a7e8-497c-be9d-5eae475f1b47/?utm_term=.07252655f3f8.

The Taliban's willingness to create beneficial alliances in periods of resource exhaustion is the second lens this thesis uses to analyze the insurgency. The rise of transnational terrorism and the international attention it brought to Afghanistan resulted in several logistical and political difficulties for the Taliban. In order to offset the challenges imposed by UN sanctions and U.S. diplomatic pressure, the Taliban entered a limited partnership with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization that provided financial and military support for their fight against the Northern Alliance from 1997 to 2001.

After their swift defeat by U.S. forces in 2002, the Taliban returned to Afghanistan armed with innovative tactical strategies. The insurgency's adaptation of previous religious, political, and military policies serves as the third lens for which this thesis studies the Taliban organization. The new policies led to significant Taliban victories between 2002 and 2009, which is the focus of chapter four.

The final lens pertains to the use of the Taliban's religious ideology and organizational structure as a means of competing for legitimacy against the U.S. sponsored government in the capital city of Kabul, Afghanistan. The democratic government of Afghanistan, supported by the U.S., is riddled with corruption, lacks infrastructure, and fails to provide basic needs to Afghans, especially those in rural areas. The Taliban have capitalized on these deficiencies and have adapted their organization to provide services to Afghans, strengthening the legitimacy of their insurgency. These adaptations have been especially effective following the implementation of new U.S. counterinsurgency policy in Afghanistan in 2009. Therefore, this lens is applied to events from 2010 until the present day.

The use of these four lenses within the context of their corresponding periods in Taliban history guide this thesis' analysis of the adaptability of the Taliban regime.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Defeating the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has been a major priority of U.S. foreign policy for the last two decades. As a result, hundreds of scholars have written on numerous topics pertaining to the Taliban regime and the U.S. response to Taliban policies in Afghanistan. This thesis addresses some of the major arguments made by leading

Afghan scholars and insurgency experts in relation to the four lenses guiding the body of this research.

1. Taliban Identity

Addressing the importance of the Taliban identity, Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason published "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan" in 2007.[2] In the article, Johnson and Mason provide an extensive history of the religious, tribal, and ethnic roots of the Taliban insurgency. While the authors acknowledge the importance of these factors in the overall character of the Taliban insurgency, they credit a single factor for the explanation of the insurgency's success in Afghanistan. They argue that the success of the Taliban insurgency is solely rooted in the charismatic nature of the Taliban's leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. The authors state:

> Thus, unlike most insurgencies, which are not centered in the personality of a single leader, the Taliban's center of gravity, in Clausewitzian terms, is not Taliban foot soldiers or field commanders or even the senior clerics around Omar, but Omar himself. Because it is a charismatic movement socially, if Mullah Omar dies, the Taliban, at least in its current incarnation, will wither and die.[3]

The charismatic qualities of Mullah Omar are undeniable and certainly play an important role in the rise of Taliban power and influence in Afghanistan. However, to argue that the Taliban insurgency lives and dies with Mullah Omar undermines the strong nationalist identity which, although cultivated by Omar, is ingrained in the actions of every Taliban fighter.

This thesis expands upon Johnson and Mason's research of the religious, tribal, and ethnic origins of the Taliban. However, it provides an alternate explanation for the success of the insurgency embedded in the nationalist objectives of the Taliban movement, not the actions of a single leader.

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[2] Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *ORBIS* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 71–89.

[3] Ibid., 80.

2. Taliban Affiliations

In "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," Neamatollah Nojumi argues that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization pursued a relationship with the Taliban in the 1990s in hopes of creating a broader network for transnational terrorism.[4] Nojumi explains, "…al-Qaeda was strengthening its roots in Afghanistan and transforming the Taliban government into a support system for international militancy and warfare around the globe."[5] Nojumi goes on to claim that the Taliban insurgency was "both militarily and financially dependent" on support from al-Qaeda until the Taliban's fall from power after the U.S. invasion in 2001. While the link between these two organizations at the end of the 20th century is irrefutable, the extent to which Nojumi claims al-Qaeda manipulated the Taliban organization to serve the needs of its international jihad underestimates the sophistication of the Taliban regime. Furthermore, Nojumi's argument that the Taliban were fully dependent on al-Qaeda undercuts the resourcefulness and adaptability of the Taliban insurgency.

In contrast to Nojumi's argument, this thesis draws on the Taliban's ability to create *limited* partnerships, which benefited the Taliban in periods of resource depletion, to further illustrate the adaptive nature of the Taliban insurgency.

3. Tactical Innovation

The changes and innovations made in the Taliban's strategy after their reemergence in Afghanistan in 2004 are the topics of numerous books, scholarly articles, and military doctrine. Contemporary authors and their arguments regarding tactical innovation are addressed throughout this thesis. However, perhaps the most well-known literature pertaining to the tactical strategies of small groups is Mao Tse-tung's insurgent guidebook, *On Guerilla Warfare*.

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[4] Neamatollah Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, ed. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2008), 90–117.

[5] Ibid., 113.

In *On Guerilla Warfare*, Mao describes a three-phase plan for organization, recruitment, and action against counterinsurgent forces. His phases provide guidelines for matters such as gaining intelligence, negotiating with the enemy, and attacking opposing forces.[6] But, as Taliban engagements with the U.S. military proved to be more sophisticated than those anticipated by Mao, the Taliban began to utilize improvised bombing technologies and found new ways to avoid Western weaponry. Faced with unmanned aerial technology, precision strike missiles, and hardened defensive capabilities, the Taliban were forced to strategize beyond Mao's guerilla tactics.

This thesis expands upon the tactical changes made by the Taliban, which deviated from Maoist strategy, to illustrate the Taliban's innate ability to recognize the need for crucial adjustments in their fighting doctrine.

4. Political Ingenuity

Antonio Giustozzi, in a report entitled *Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure*, makes the argument that the growing disorderly structure of the Taliban's governance networks, apparent beginning in 2007, has decreased the political unity and effectiveness of the insurgency in Afghanistan.[7] Discussing the Taliban's shadow government, Giustozzi writes:

> The Taliban does not have a unified shadow government; the Quetta Shura and the Rasool Shura both run separate governance systems (pretty weak and limited in the case of the latter), while the Miran Shah runs its own system only nominally under the supervision of the Quetta Shura. The Mashhad Shura up to now has not been doing governance at all.[8]

Giustozzi's claim regarding the unity of the Taliban shadow governments throughout Afghanistan is persuasive. However, what Giustozzi fails to iterate is that the shadow governments still provided a superior method of government than the elected officials in Kabul.

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[6] Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1961), 41–50.

[7] Antonio Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure* (Oslo, Norway: Landinfo, 2017), https://landinfo.no/asset/3589/1/3589_1.pdf.

[8] Ibid.

Drawing on research regarding the political ingenuity of the Taliban this thesis examines the Taliban's ability to maintain political legitimacy in Afghanistan despite the issues cited by Giustozzi.

D. BACKGROUND

The Taliban became an official political and military organization in 1994, but the historical events which led to the formation of the Taliban are vital in understanding the development of the insurgency's adaptive nature. Many of the Afghans who left their homes to join the Taliban also fought in the anti-Soviet jihadist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Their experiences as mujahedeen fighters during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and their experiences during the Afghan civil war that followed, would help to develop the character of the Taliban insurgency in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

1. The Soviet-Afghan War

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979 in the hopes of extending communist influence further into Central Asia. For the ten years between 1979 and 1989 Afghanistan served as a proxy war in the larger context of the Cold War. The mujahedeen, a network of Afghan insurgents, fought tirelessly to remove Soviet forces and their communist authority from Afghanistan. The U.S., in pursuit of their containment strategy, supported the mujahedeen with financial assistance and modern weaponry.

Throughout the ten-year war, U.S. and Soviet governments poured billions of dollars of aid and resources into Afghanistan, but when the Soviet Union began their withdrawal in 1988, the artillery, tanks, aircraft, ammunition, etc., were abandoned in Afghanistan. These stockpiles of weaponry and military armaments would become extremely important in arming the rebels of the Afghan civil war, and eventually the Taliban.

2. The Afghan Civil War

The Afghan mujahedeen, having waged a successful jihad against the Soviets, dispersed throughout the country. Some sought out religious education in madrasas across the border in Pakistan, which had been established by the Pakistani government to train

religiously-oriented militants during the anti-Soviet jihad.[9] Some fighters returned to their villages and reintegrated into society. The politically-motivated mujahedeen focused on the removal of the Soviet-installed government still present in Kabul. Several embittered mujahedeen, who were no longer receiving war-time benefits from the forces that recruited them during the Soviet invasion, resorted to criminal activities to raise money. These Afghans began demanding payment from store owners, looting shops, raping and beating women, and heavily taxing vehicles at numerous locations along major roadways.[10] Not only did these groups terrorize villagers in Afghanistan, but they also created alliances and fought against each other in bloody skirmishes throughout the country.[11]

When the Soviet Union officially dissolved in 1991, the pro-communist President, Mohammad Najibullah, lost aid from his Soviet supporters who had been providing an estimated $4 billion each year and hundreds of aircraft, weaponry, and armored vehicles to keep his government afloat.[12] Shortly thereafter, in April of 1992 Najibullah resigned his position as President of Afghanistan.

In the wake of Najibullah's resignation, nearly a dozen political groups emerged each with separate political objectives, organized in opposing structures, supported by different ethnic groups, and led by scholars, military officers, engineers, and clerics.[13] Afghanistan expert, Barnett Rubin accurately described the post-Soviet period writing, "Afghanistan was left with no legitimate state, no national leadership, multiple armed groups in every locality, a devastated economy, and a people dispersed throughout the region, indeed the world."[14] The U.S. and other international actors attempted to facilitate a peaceful transition with the signing of the Peshawar Accords in 1992, but opposing

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[9] Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 1999), 14–16.

[10] Ibid., 23.

[11] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2001), 21.

[12] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2002), 109.

[13] Ibid., 208–215.

[14] Ibid., x.

Afghan identities inhibited a long-term solution. Consequently, a violent civil war erupted as ethnic populations advocated for their own leaders, and the splintering of militia groups led to intense fighting between factions.[15]

As the bloody civil war and mujahedeen-turned-warlords continued to ravage the country, the justice-seeking actions of one particular Afghan came as a breath of fresh air for those exhausted from years of conflict. In September of 1994, Mullah Mohammad Omar, a former mujahedeen fighter who had returned to a madrasa following the Soviet occupation, came across a village which had recently been the victim of brutal violence at the hands of warlords. Several narratives exist explaining the actions of Mullah Omar, which eventually lead to the creation of the Taliban, *The Taliban Phenomenon* explains the event as such:

> …a Herati family, while on its way to Kandahar from Herat, was stopped at a checkpoint ninety kilometers short of Kandahar by local mujahedeen bandits. The men and women were separated. The boys were taken away and molested. The girls were repeatedly raped until they became unconscious. Later all of them were killed and their bodies partially burnt.[16]

According to the story, Mullah Omar was the first man to come across the village following the incident and sought out several other madrasa students to help bury the bodies of the villagers and to bring justice against the criminals who perpetrated the attacks. The small group of men who helped Mullah Omar became inspired by his desire to undo the injustices of the bandits. Mullah Omar, recognizing broader support for his desire to bring justice back to Afghanistan, began the first official steps in creating the Taliban.

Students and former mujahedeen who had returned to madrasas throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan heard of Mullah Omar's movement and left their schools to follow his mission. As his following grew in size he outlined his goals to bring about peace to Afghanistan, remove the weaponry used to terrorize the population, enforce sharia law, and restore the Islamic nature of the country.[17] These key components of the Taliban vision

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[15] Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997*, 4–5.

[16] Ibid., 25.

[17] Rashid, *Taliban*, 22–23.

were supported widely by Afghans who were incredibly frustrated with the current affairs within the nation. The group gained followers quickly. Shortly thereafter, in pursuit of their nationalist objectives, the Taliban declared themselves a political and military entity in late 1994.

E. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The body of this thesis analyzes the Taliban organization through five distinct time periods, beginning in 1994 until present-day, as a means of chronologically moving through the modern history of the insurgency.

Chapter II discusses the Taliban's rise to political power from 1994 to 1997. The chapter explores the complex factors which make up Afghan identity including religion, ethnicity, and tribalism. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates how the Taliban developed a comprehensive national identity to unite their followers during one of the most divided periods in Afghan history.

Chapter III examines the Taliban organization from 1997 to 2001 as they faced new pressures from international actors and cultivated relationships with beneficial allies. The rise of transnational terrorism and the beginning of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan during this period illustrates the Taliban's willingness to adapt their ideological and political narratives in periods of conflict.

Chapter IV studies the major political, organizational, social, and tactical adaptations made by the Taliban between 2002 and 2009. As the Taliban insurgency regrouped and returned to Afghanistan, they operated with revolutionized tactics which served several devastating blows to the U.S. counterinsurgency.

Competing for legitimacy against the U.S.-supported government in Kabul, the Taliban have adapted their political infrastructure to undermine efforts of the central government. Chapter V analyzes these political strategies executed by the Taliban regime from 2010 until the present day.

The sixth and final chapter provides an overview of the current character of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2019. This chapter culminates in a selection of policy recommendations informed by the research provided throughout this thesis.

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II. THE ROLE OF IDENTITY

The Afghan Civil War in the 1990s led to the violent deaths of thousands of Afghans and represents one of the most divided periods in Afghan history.[18] The rebel groups who fought for control of the government during the civil war were aligned based upon, in large part, ethnic, tribal and political identities. However, due to the great diversity of the Afghan population, those groups struggled to obtain broad legitimacy among the people.

In 1994, the Taliban emerged as a nationalist organization, campaigning for the establishment of a united government in Afghanistan, the restoration of justice, and the incorporation of Islamic jurisprudence in the form of sharia law. Their ideology attempted to mitigate ethnic and tribal divisions and bring Afghans together with a uniquely Afghan spirit. Bridging differences between tribal confederations and ethnic groups, utilizing the charismatic leadership of Mullah Omar, and the use of an overarching Islamic character to motivate the Afghan population, the Taliban crafted a sophisticated strategy that defines the growth of their insurgency from 1994 to 1996.

A. ETHNICITY IN THE AFGHAN CIVIL WAR

Afghanistan is one of the most diverse countries in Asia, both geographically and ethnically. The Hindu Kush mountain range separates the country into three main regions. The mountain range spans from the country's northern border with Tajikistan and China, runs along its eastern border with Pakistan, and ends in the southern regions of Afghanistan's Helmand Valley. The ridges and valleys of the Hindu Kush provide fertile plains, strategic highlands, and arid desert land in the south. Most importantly, spread throughout the diverse landscape are over a dozen ethnic groups each comprised of numerous tribes and clans.[19]

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[18] Richard H. Shultz Jr. and Andrea J. Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2006), 180.

[19] Brian Glyn Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America's Longest War* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 15.

Pashtuns makeup nearly half of the Afghan population and mostly reside in the southern and eastern regions of the country.[20] The Pashtun population is further divided into two main tribal confederations, the Ghilzai and Durrani. The Durrani tribal confederation spans throughout southern Afghanistan and combined with the Ghilzai who reside mostly in southeastern Afghanistan, account for two-thirds of the Pashtun population in Afghanistan. Each confederation is divided into several smaller tribes and then broken down even further into numerous clans. For centuries, the Ghilzai and Durrani tribes have considered each other rivals and have fought against each other for political authority over the Pashtun community.

Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, Turkmen, Ismailis and several other ethnic groups make up the central and northern regions of Afghanistan.[21] These groups speak different languages and dialects, follow separate tribal codes, and practice different religious customs.[22] Although each of these groups are Afghan in the geographical sense, they view themselves ethnolinguistically, primarily as Uzbeks, Tajiks, etc., first and foremost. Throughout history, the various ethnic groups of Afghanistan have united to defeat invading empires and occupying forces. However, history has also shown that once foreign fighters leave the Afghan homeland, Afghans revert to centuries-old ethnic and tribal-embittered rivalries.[23] As divisive ethnic affiliations remerge after an international conflict, the stability of Afghanistan is again challenged by warring factions. This pattern is illustrated following the removal of the Soviet-installed government in Afghanistan in 1992.

The Taliban Phenomenon describes the environment in Afghanistan following the exit of President Najibullah, writing:

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[20] While there has not been a census in Afghanistan for decades, most analysts believe that between 40–50% of the country is Pashtun. https://www.npr.org/2013/05/08/179079930/afghans-confront-senstive-issue-of-ethnicity.

[21] Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War and Religion in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Zed Books, 2002), 9–11.

[22] Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002), 1–3.

[23] Shultz and Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias*, 149–150.

> By the year 1992, the average citizen of Afghanistan was sick and tired of the civil war that had been raging for three years…The people had lost faith in their leaders, who were making and breaking alliances overnight. They found none of them trustworthy as they were not fulfilling their promises, some of which had been made in the precincts of the Holy Kaaba…[24]

In an attempt to facilitate the peaceful transition of power in Afghanistan, the international community and various Afghan political groups signed the Peshawar Accords shortly after President Najibullah's resignation in 1992. The Accords implemented an interim government that called for two transitional presidents, serving for a total of six months. Following the six-month period, a council would convene to select an interim government.[25]

The first transitional president, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, was a Pashtun and served for two months. The second president, serving for four months, was Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik. Although the Accords outlined a four-month presidency for Rabbani he would go on to serve as President of Afghanistan for four years. Many of the insurgent groups throughout Afghanistan were exhausted after the decade-long war with the Soviet Union and agreed to the short-term solution offered by the Peshawar Accords.

However, one particular group refused to accept the terms of the Peshawar Accords. Gulbuddin Hekmetyar, the leader of the Pashtun organization, Hizb-e-Islami, vehemently rejected the Accords, specifically due to the appointment of Burhanuddin Rabbani as the second President of Afghanistan. To the Pashtuns of Hizb-e-Islami, Rabbani's presidency was seen as a disgrace to Pashtun political history.

For 300 years prior to Rabbani's presidency in 1992, the head of government in Afghanistan had been of Pashtun descent. When the Peshawar Accords installed Rabbani as President, Hekmetyar quickly organized his militia to remove Rabbani and to ensure the return of Pashtun leadership to the capital.[26] Hekmetyar's objection to Rabbani's

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[24] Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon*, 22.

[25] Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 271.

[26] Rashid, *Taliban*, 21.

presidency led to the breakdown of the entire Peshawar agreement and the eruption of an ethnically-charged civil war.

As Rabbani attempted to create political stability in Kabul, he recognized the growing threat from Hizb-e-Islami and appointed Ahmed Shah Massoud as his defense minister. Massoud, also a Tajik, had become famous for his heroic actions as a mujahedeen fighter in the anti-Soviet jihad. Recognizing Massoud's reputation and the large Tajik coalition he commanded in northern Afghanistan, President Rabbani hoped Massoud's leadership would help to defeat Pashtun opposition. However, Rabbani's appointment of a Massoud further encouraged opposition from the Pashtun population as they grew fearful of a government-sanctioned non-Pashtun army in the capital. Throughout the tenure of Rabbani's presidency, Hekmetyar's forces continually bombed Kabul, killing over 1,000 Afghans and destroying the city in the process.[27]

The destruction left behind from the anti-Soviet jihad in addition to the continuing conflict from the civil war greatly inhibited Rabbani's success as president, and as a result, further weakened his legitimacy. The revenue needed to rebuild the city and to support the Afghan population never reached Kabul as local warlords and militias kept the money for their own purposes. However, despite his lack of popularity, Rabbani's presidential tenure was extended due to the transitional government's inability to convene while intense fighting waged in the capital. When fighting slowed enough for a new election, many ethnic groups did not participate as they claimed Rabbani had undue influence in the proceedings. In December of 1992, Rabbani was elected as the President of Afghanistan, but his presidency was considered illegitimate by many opposing ethnic groups.[28]

Despite Afghans' exhaustion from decades of fighting, the civil war continued and increased in brutality as the conflict persisted. For the next two years, commanders changed alliances, fought for and lost control of villages, and traded weapons and foreign aid in

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[27] Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 272–273.

[28] Ibid.

their quest for political power. Furthermore, Pashtun forces began to fight with each other as Pakistan provided aid to select tribes and avoided associations with others.[29]

Further complicating the ethnic divisions in the capital, Massoud sought out aid from General Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek, who had served as the commander of the in the northern division of the Afghan National Army during the Najibullah presidency. Following the decline of Najibullah's regime, Dostum consolidated power among the Uzbek population in the north and created the Jumbesh Party. With the Soviet-provided tanks, artillery, and resources left behind, Dostum held control of several major cities in northern Afghanistan.[30] Massoud recognized the strategic importance of an alliance with Dostum and gained his support in 1992. However, in 1994, Dostum severed his alliance with Rabbani and Massoud to support Hekmetyar. Dostum would go on to dissolve his relationship with Hekmetyar just a few months later.

Some estimates claim that more than 25,000 people died in the Afghan civil war between 1992 and 1994.[31] What the warring ethnic factions in Kabul failed to recognize was a broader nationalist objective that would appeal to a larger majority of the Afghan population. The growth of secularization that had been occurring since the early 1970s,[32] the injustices perpetrated by warlords and gangsters throughout the country, and the brutalities of decades of war were ignored as major unifying tenants of Massoud, Hekmetyar, Dostum, and Rabbani's platforms. Instead, they chose to focus on ethnic supremacy. So, by the end of 1994, Afghanistan was in desperate need of a consistent and ethnically unifying movement that would bring stability and peace back to the country.

B. ETHNICITY AND THE RISE OF THE TALIBAN

When the Taliban emerged in 1994, their policies and recruitment strategies were unique to the Afghan landscape and environment. The organization developed

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[29] Rashid, *Taliban*, 21.

[30] Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified*, 33.

[31] Shultz and Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias*, 180.

[32] Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified*, 134.

revolutionary methods for rallying Pashtun support across the spectrum of separate tribal confederations while also encouraging inclusivity of non-Pashtun Afghans. The Taliban capitalized on the ethnic complexities of Afghanistan and found ways to lessen hostilities through adherence to a religious ideology.

Thomas Johnson and M. Chris Mason argue in their article, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," that the Taliban initially represented a tribal movement, tied to their leader Mullah Omar's heritage in the Hotak tribe of the larger Ghilzai confederation. They explain:

> To truly understand the Taliban, we must thus go behind the mask of Islamism (the Taliban's opponents in the Northern Alliance were also conservative Muslims) and examine the movement as a tribal phenomenon. On closer inspection, the Taliban is neither simply a Pashtun movement nor even a pan-Ghilzai movement, although its area of influence coincides closely with Ghilzai lands. It is largely led by a single tribe. Most of the senior leadership of the Taliban—with a few exceptions of Kakar tribesmen of the Ghurghusht confederation, who are close to Mullah Omar—was and is drawn specifically from Mullah Omar's own Hotaki tribe.[33]

Johnson and Mason correctly point out that the of the core of Taliban leadership were Hotaki Pashtuns, and emphasize the tribal connections of the organization in its infancy. At the time Johnson and Mason published their article, their analysis was correct. However, the Taliban came to realize the need for broader support and began to attract Afghans from all backgrounds, further illustrating their adaptability and ingenuity.

The Taliban exploited ethnic loyalties for their advantage in regions where they had tribal connections. For example, they consolidated power in the regions where they had strong support from Ghilzai Pashtuns, especially where Omar was well known in the Hotaki regions. As the Taliban moved west towards Durrani controlled provinces, they found ways to incorporate both Durrani and Ghilzai fighters into their organization to

[33] Johnson and Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," 74–78.

secure broader Pashtun support.[34] In Durrani regions, the Taliban permitted provincial leadership from Durranis as long as they followed the Taliban's guidelines.

Furthermore, in regions with ethnic minorities, the Taliban focused on the nationalist and Islamist ideologies of their organization to appeal to the non-Pashtun Afghans. In fact, the Taliban issued letters early in their campaign which encouraged all Afghans who sought an end to the chaos in the country to join their organization. The letters did not pressure Afghans of specific tribes or those with particular ethnic affiliations. Instead, the letters welcomed all Afghans who felt passionate about the Taliban mission to bring peace, stability, and Islamic law to the country.[35] The insurgency's tailored approach to recruitment resulted in unity that was absent in the political militias fighting for power in Kabul at the time.

Supporting the ingenuity of the Taliban's recruitment strategies was the charismatic leadership of Mullah Omar. Omar was a quiet and shy man who spent most of his adult life furthering his Islamic education in madrasas, leaving his studies only to fight in the anti-Soviet jihad and to create the Taliban.[36] His pious and dedicated attitude was revered by many of Afghans who interacted with him. But, despite his popularity, Omar remained humble in his decisions as the leader of the insurgency. He left religious decisions to the Islamic scholars of the ulema, he allowed his council to run important meetings and interjected only when he felt necessary, and made himself available to Taliban fighters who sought his guidance.[37]

As Johnson and Mason point out, Omar's charismatic leadership was extremely important in the expansion of the Taliban insurgency. They go so far as to say that the

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[34] Hayder Mili and Jacob Townsend, "Tribal Dynamics of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 8 (August 2009): 1–2, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss8-Art3.pdf.

[35] Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 2012), 117–119.

[36] Rashid, *Taliban*, 24.

[37] Ibid., 24.

Taliban would not exist without the leadership of Omar.[38] But, what Johnson and Mason attribute to solely charisma is in fact only one aspect of the larger strategic strength of the united Taliban organization.

C. MILITARY EXPANSION

Winston Churchill, in his book *The Story of the Malakand Field Force,* describes his encounters with Pashtun villagers as the British military attempted to conquer the North West Frontier in the late 19th century. Churchill tells a story of the conquering nature of the Pashtun people writing:

> He becomes a man to be feared. Then he builds a tower to his house and overawes those around him in the village. Gradually they submit to his authority. He might now rule the village; but he aspires still higher. He persuades or compels his neighbors to join him, in an attack on the castle of a local khan. The attack succeeds. The khan flies or is killed, the castle captured. The retainers make terms with the conqueror. The land tenure is feudal. In return for their acres they follow their new chief to war. Were he to treat them worse than the other khans treated their servants, they would sell their strong arms elsewhere. He treats them well. Others resort to him. He buys more rifles. He conquers two or three neighboring khans. He has now become a power.[39]

Churchill's account of the Pashtun villagers eerily matches the attitude of Mullah Omar and the Taliban as they traveled north in late 1994. Having attained a persuasive and inclusive narrative, Taliban forces began their military campaign and moved north with the ultimate goal of capturing the Afghan capital of Kabul.

In October of 1994, the Taliban celebrated their first military defeat after capturing the town of Spin Boldak along the southern portion of the Afghan-Pakistan border. Stored in Spin Boldak, the Taliban seized the arms supply of Hekmetyar with the support of the Pakistani officials in the town. Hekmetyar's stash included large amounts of weaponry and ammunition.[40] Prior to their success at Spin Boldak, the Taliban were organically Afghan

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[38] Johnson and Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," 79–80.

[39] Winston Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War* (London: Longmans, 1898) 6, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/iau.31858015091402.

[40] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, 116.

both in funding and in support.[41] However, impressed by the Taliban's swift actions in Spin Boldak and encouraged by their justice-seeking motives, the Pakistani government took note of the Taliban's growing influence in southern Afghanistan.

Early in November of 1994, in need of Afghan support, the Pakistan government called on Mullah Omar and his followers to help free a Pakistani convoy which had been hijacked and held for ransom by warlords outside of Kandahar.[42] When the Taliban arrived, the hijackers attempted to escape but were quickly captured by Taliban insurgents and put to death. Their bodies were displayed within the town as a symbol of the justice performed by the Taliban for the townspeople. The Taliban continued on the road into the heart of Kandahar where they removed the main militia comprised of nearly 2,500 men, and took control of the city.[43] The capture of Kandahar marked the first major victory for the Taliban.

Kandahar, a former Soviet stronghold, provided the Taliban with several substantial additions to their military capabilities. Stockpiled in the former Kandahar Soviet airbase, the Taliban found several fighter aircraft and helicopters, advanced weaponry, armored vehicles, and ammunition. In need of training for such advanced equipment, the Taliban enlisted the help of fighters who had defected from Afghan armed forces after the fall of Najibullah's government. These men provided expertise and training in subjects such as airpower, artillery, and tanks to other members of the Taliban.[44]

In control of Kandahar, the Taliban patrolled the major highways around the city to ensure fair passage and instituted Sharia law for those living within the city limits. As the first example of what a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would look like, Kandahar became the home base for Taliban operations. At this point, having secured the second-largest city in Afghanistan, the Taliban had caught the attention of warring factions in Kabul, Afghan villagers, Pakistani madrasa students, the Pakistani government, and

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41 Ibid., 120.

42 Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 104–105.

43 Rashid, *Taliban*, 28.

44 Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon*, 58–59.

Muslim donors in Saudi Arabia.[45] Pakistani madrasa students crossed the border in Afghanistan and made their way to Taliban controlled areas. It was at this time that Mullah Omar declared the Taliban an official political entity in Afghanistan.

In March of 1995, the Taliban traveled north towards the town of Herat located in western Afghanistan. However, the Taliban faced significant challenges as they neared Herat. Having heard of the Taliban's success in Kandahar and their movements toward Herat, Ismail Khan, the ruling commander in Herat, called for reinforcements from commanders in Kabul. Receiving the aid, Khan was able to protect the city and the Taliban suffered substantial losses due to superior airpower and manpower in Herat. Riding their initial success against the Taliban, Ismail Khan attempted to attack the Taliban in October of 1995 in an effort to capture Kandahar. However, his plan backfired as he underestimated the strength of Taliban forces in Kandahar. Not only did Khan lose men in his efforts to capture Kandahar, but his over-extension left Herat vulnerable. In September of 1995, the Taliban took control of Herat with the support of General Dostum, who defected from his alliance with Hekmetyar.[46] At the time, Dostum had control of several Soviet aircraft that provided critical support as the Taliban conducted their assault on Herat.

For months, the Taliban had been attempting to make their way towards Kabul but had been met with fierce fighting by opposition forces in the capital. The Taliban were believed to be suffering from poor leadership, lack of structure, and inexperienced fighters in comparison to the pro-government forces in Kabul.[47] Using their experiences to learn for future engagements, the Taliban focused their efforts on capturing provinces surrounding Kabul.

The Taliban continued to advance throughout Afghanistan, capturing Jalalabad, a town roughly 100 miles east of Kabul, in August 1996. Following their success in Jalalabad, the Taliban took control of four provinces surrounding Kabul. After securing

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[45] Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 104–105.

[46] Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2015), 228.

[47] Rashid, *Taliban*, 47.

Sarobi in September 1996, the Taliban were a mere 45 miles outside the city limits of Kabul.[48]

Recognizing the need to consolidate and enhance his authority, Mullah Omar took several actions to strengthen the Taliban narrative throughout Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's assault on Kabul. Fulfilling his promise to the Taliban's earliest followers, Omar officially changed the name of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996, signifying the reestablishment of Islamic purity in the country.[49] And, solidifying his image as the divine leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar entered the shrine in Kandahar that housed the cloak of the Prophet Muhammad, one of the holiest sites in Islam. With the cloak in his arms, Mullah Omar brought it to a rooftop for the townspeople to view. The public showing of the cloak, which had been viewed by only a few people in Afghan history and had not been removed from its safe since 1932, solidified Mullah Omar's legitimacy to his followers. They began calling him Commander of the Faithful, a title reserved for the most influential and pious leaders in Islamic history.[50]

The Taliban leadership also put renewed effort into enforcing their strict interpretations of sharia law as a means hardening Taliban authority in their southern territories. The General Department for the Preservation of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice was created to ensure order within Taliban-controlled cities.[51] Those who broke the laws were often publicly executed or amputated in town squares. Men were required to grow their beards, women were no longer allowed to participate in public events and were forced to wear conservative burqas. In efforts to remove all outside influence, Taliban members collected televisions, VCRs, non-religious books, movies, and tapes, and set fire to them in town centers.

Meanwhile, Massoud recognized the strength of the Taliban as they rallied outside of Kabul and ordered the evacuation of the capital. He also called for the rejuvenation of

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[48] Ibid., 48.

[49] Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 230.

[50] Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 125–127.

[51] Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 154.

the United Islamic Front, an alliance that had formed to oust the Soviet government in Afghanistan in 1992. The coalition became known as the Northern Alliance and was comprised of northern Hazaris, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. However, Massoud's coalition was not strong enough to counter the Taliban forces outside of Kabul.[52]

On September 26, 1997, only days after their seizure of Sarobi, the Taliban entered the capital from several directions and were met with little opposition.[53] Their success in Kabul meant that the Taliban controlled nearly three-fourths of the country by the end of 1996. The Taliban had swept across Afghanistan while capitalizing on the ethnic civil war which occupied the major military forces within the country. Before garnering the attention of opposition, the Taliban were able to develop their religious mission, arm themselves with significant stockpiles of advanced Soviet weaponry, and solidify a strong support base made up ethnically-diverse Afghan citizens. But by 1997 those conditions had significantly changed, no longer in favor of Mullah Omar and his Taliban followers.

The Taliban struggled to establish a government that could effectively oversee all of the territories they had amassed between 1994 and 1996. The puritanical interpretation of Islam being enforced by the provincial leaders led to waves of dissent. The brutal punishments of the Taliban-implemented sharia laws were causing Afghans to flee their controlled cities. Furthermore, continued engagements with the Northern Alliance had destroyed cities, and the Taliban failed to reconstruct infrastructure without proper funding and support.[54]

D. CONCLUSION

The Taliban's unifying nationalist identity no longer sufficiently supported the Taliban's objectives. So, the leadership worked to develop a new strategy as they pursued their political goals, calling on international sponsors and further developing their relationship with the Saudi millionaire they had been harboring, Osama bin Laden.

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[52] Shultz and Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias*, 41.

[53] Rashid, *Taliban*, 48.

[54] Nojumi, "The Rise and Fall of the Taliban," 112.

III. TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

Taliban forces had swept through Afghanistan between 1994 and 1996, and now, controlling nearly eighty percent of the country, the demands of governance began to weigh on Taliban leadership.[55] The rebuilding of infrastructure damaged from years of conflict, the need to raise revenue, and the requirements of providing healthcare and other services meant the Taliban needed resources they could not acquire on their own. Moreover, new attention brought to the Taliban regime and their strict ideological practices alienated the insurgency from potential sources of international aid and support.

Mullah Omar, faced with the need to adapt his insurgency, cautiously sought new alliances and limited partnerships with actors who were willing to bring the necessary resources to Afghanistan. For a time, these partnerships benefited Omar and the insurgency, but with the turn of the millennium, Omar's judgements would come to backfire on the Taliban organization.

A. INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, shortly after Madeleine Albright was appointed as the U.S. Secretary of State in January of 1997, a diplomat working for her administration was quoted as saying the U.S. had "no policy" in Afghanistan.[56] At the time, the U.S. government had been aware of the growing power of the Taliban in Afghanistan but hoped the group would bring stability to Kabul in the midst of civil war.

However, in November of 1997, Albright visited a refugee camp on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While speaking with women and children who fled the Taliban regime Albright learned of some of the group's harshest sharia policies. Quoted in an article published in the *New York Times*, Albright states, "It's very clear why we're

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[55] Eric S. Margolis, *War at the Top of the World: The Struggle for Afghanistan and Asia* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2007), 65.

[56] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf.

opposed to Taliban. We're opposed to their approach to human rights, to their despicable treatment of women and children and their lack of respect for human dignity, in a way more reminiscent of the past than the future."[57] The statement by Albright represented the first strongly anti-Taliban statement made by the U.S. government. As a former refugee herself, Albright returned to the U.S. with a new, anti-Taliban agenda.

Albright's visit was the first in a string of events that brought greater attention to the Taliban. The international community began to learn more about the Taliban ideology, and as a result, the insurgency faced new difficulties in adapting to varying demands within Afghanistan.

B. ADAPTATIONS: BIN LADEN AND AL-QAEDA

As Mullah Omar struggled with finding new resources to support his regime and wrestled with administrative demands, the insurgency continued to wage war with the military forces of the Northern Alliance. Yet, progress became stagnant as the Northern Alliance withstood continual assaults by Taliban forces. In 1996, Mullah Omar met Osama bin Laden, with whom he would begin to develop a limited partnership in order to further the Taliban's greater military and political objectives.

Osama bin Laden was the son of a wealthy Yemeni businessman who owned and operated one of the largest construction firms throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Among other projects, the bin Laden family business was responsible for the expansion and maintenance of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina.[58] As a pious student of Islamic studies, Osama bin Laden travelled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight in the anti-Soviet jihad. Using his family's connections and wealth, bin Laden helped to buy weapons and provide limited resources to the Afghan mujahedeen. Inspired by his experiences in Afghanistan, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia to work for the family business as he continued to support jihadist goals worldwide.

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[57] Steven Erlanger, "In Afghan Refugee Camp, Albright Hammers Taliban," *New York Times*, November 19, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/19/world/in-afghan-refugee-camp-albright-hammers-taliban.html.

[58] Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2008), 12–15.

When Saudi Arabia allowed the entrance of U.S. forces into the kingdom following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, bin Laden publically denounced the Saudi Royal Family. In 1992, bin Laden left for Sudan after ruining his relationships with much of the Royal Family, who eventually terminated his citizenship in 1994. As bin Laden continued to speak out against Saudi Arabia's relationship with the U.S., the Royal Family pressured Sudan to expel him from their country as well. The Sudanese government complied in 1996.[59]

When bin Laden was expelled from Sudan, he sought residence in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, with comrades he met during the anti-Soviet jihad. It was in Jalalabad where Mullah Omar and bin Laden crossed paths for the first time as the Taliban seized control of the city in late 1996.[60] In the fall of 1996, when the Taliban took control of Kabul, bin Laden declared *bayat*, a term signifying loyalty and allegiance, to Omar and the Taliban organization as they fought the Northern Alliance.

However, bin Laden had made a reputation for himself with his severe political outbursts. The negative international attention he received was the main reason he sought safe haven in Afghanistan in the first place. Playing on Omar's tribal *Pashtunwali* customs of hospitability and protection, bin Laden asked for continued shelter in Afghanistan. Notoriously cautious of outsiders, Omar recognized that he would need to keep a watchful eye on bin Laden, but allowed him to stay in Afghanistan.

Busy tending to his Afghan insurgency, Omar urged bin Laden to keep a low profile and to avoid bringing undue attention to Afghanistan. In 1997, Mullah Omar requested the relocation of bin Laden to the Taliban operational headquarters in Kandahar.[61] Nonetheless, while Omar focused on his insurgency bin Laden began to develop the transnational mission of his budding al-Qaeda terrorist network. Specifically, bin Laden began planning devastating attacks on international targets, unbeknownst to Mullah Omar.

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59 Rashid, *Taliban*, 133.

60 Alex Strick van Linschoten and Feliz Kuehn, *Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Center on International Cooperation, 2011), https://cic.es.its.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/gregg_sep_tal_alqaeda.pdf.

61 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report.*

a. Bin Laden's Fatwas

The first indicators of bin Laden's growing transnational terrorist organization came when he issued extremist fatwas against the U.S. and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.[62] The fatwas were in response to the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, which bin Laden vehemently opposed. The fatwas caught the attention of the Saudi monarchy and officials in the U.S. government, the attention that Omar had specifically warned against. Bin Laden's actions frustrated Omar as they directly defied his requests to maintain a low profile in Afghanistan.[63]

In an attempt to maintain the relationship with Omar, bin Laden began to support the Taliban insurgency in several ways. In Kandahar, bin Laden agreed to finance the building of two mosques which appealed to the religious ideologies of the Taliban. Furthermore, bin Laden connected Omar with other wealthy Saudis who were willing to support the Taliban both financially and logistically.[64]

The turbulent relationship between the two leaders continued throughout the latter half of the 1990s. But, Omar continued to provide safe-haven to bin Laden as their relationship evolved into a beneficial military partnership.

b. Brigade 055

The 055 Brigade signifies one of the strongest associations between al-Qaeda and the Taliban and proved to be of tremendous benefit to the Taliban insurgency. The 055 Brigade was as a contingent of fighters, educated in al-Qaeda training camps, and incorporated into the ranks of the Taliban insurgency specifically for the purpose of defeating the Northern Alliance. The brigade was comprised of some of the most

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62 Strick van Linschoten et al., *Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan*.

63 Ibid.

64 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004), 342.

experienced fighters from within the two organizations.[65] Rohan Gunaratna describes the makeup of the brigade in his book, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror.* He writes:

> 055 Brigade was drawn from two overlapping generations of Afghan veterans: the first, who had driven out the Russians, and the second, generally better educated, who had fought elsewhere—e.g. Kashmir, Daghestan, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh—but had been trained in Afghanistan.[66]

The brigade quickly earned the reputation of being one of the most devoted and ruthless groups of fighters within the Taliban and al-Qaeda ranks.[67] The highly-trained fighters became an integral component of the Taliban fighting forces and served as the spearhead for the insurgencies military operations. The 055 Brigade cemented the association between al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the late 1990s.

c. African Embassy Bombings

In June 1998, Prince Turki al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia flew to Kandahar to meet with Mullah Omar to discuss the Taliban's growing relationship with bin Laden. Bin Laden's fatwas, issued from his hideout in Afghanistan, claimed the Saudi Royal family were not legitimate rulers of the Saudi Kingdom. As a result, Prince Turki met with Omar to demand bin Laden be turned over for criminal proceedings in Saudi Arabia. According to Prince Turki's account, Omar agreed to turn bin Laden over if Saudi Arabia provided an outline for the Islamic proceedings he would face once in their custody. Negotiations between the Taliban and Saudi government continued through July of 1998.[68] Meanwhile, al-Qaeda leadership concentrated on plans which would bring new levels of international attention to their jihad, and consequently, negative attention to the Taliban.

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65 Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2002), 58–60.

66 Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, 59.

67 Daniel Eisenberg, "Secrets Of Brigade 055," *TIME*, October 28, 2001, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,181591,00.html.

68 Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 397–402.

In August of 1998, al-Qaeda perpetrated two simultaneous attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The attacks resulted in the death of 224 people, twelve of whom were U.S. citizens, and wounded several thousand others.[69] Bin Laden had been on the radar of U.S. intelligence agencies prior to the embassy bombings, but the execution of the attacks resulted in a worldwide campaign to bring bin Laden to justice. Known to be providing safe-haven to bin Laden, the international community focused their attention on the Taliban in Afghanistan for assistance in attaining custody of bin Laden. Again, Mullah Omar protected bin Laden and refused to give up his location to international authorities without a proper Islamic judicial proceeding.

C. INCREASING INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

One week after the bombings on the African embassies, the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed a resolution in response to the attacks. UN Resolution 1189 called for a coordinated response in order to prevent the growth of international terrorism.[70] The al-Qaeda bombings in Africa served as a serious indicator for many countries that the growth of transnational terrorism was becoming a significant threat to state security and international peace in the wake of the Cold War.

The increased anti-terrorism efforts by the international community led to amplified pressure on the Taliban to hold bin Laden accountable for his actions in Africa. The Taliban demanded evidence from the U.S. to bring charges against bin Laden in an Islamic court. However, the U.S. denied the Taliban's request and kept the details of their embassy investigations secret. As a result, the Taliban claimed they could not hold bin Laden responsible, and they declared him an innocent man in Afghanistan.[71]

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69 "20th Anniversary of the U.S. Embassy Bombings in East Africa," *CIA*, April 2, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2018-featured-story-archive/anniversary-of-us-embassy-bombings-in-east-africa.html.

70 Res 1189, United Nations Security Council. (1998). http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1189.

71 Tim Weiner, "Taliban Proclaim Bin Laden Innocent in Embassy Attacks," *New York Times*, November 21, 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/21/world/taliban-proclaim-bin-laden-innocent-in-embassy-attacks.html.

Just weeks after the passing of Resolution 1189, the UN Security Council convened again and passed Resolution 1193, specifically addressing the Taliban's extremist policies in Afghanistan. The resolution called for an immediate cease-fire between warring elements in the country and an end to international intervention that did not support broader peace attempts.[72] Throughout the remainder of 1998 and into 1999, The UN Security Council continued to pass resolutions denouncing the actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

1. Mazar-i Sharif and Recognition of the Taliban Government

As the UN assembled to draft the resolutions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the insurgency focused on territorial gains in northern Afghanistan. Taliban forces had reached an impasse with Northern Alliance troops both sides of the conflict suffered casualties with little measurable progress. So, the Taliban refocused their attention on the city of Mazar-i Sharif, which had been under the control of the serial defector, General Dostum, and his Uzbek militia for a majority of the civil war.

While strategizing for their attack on the city, the Taliban discovered one of Dostum's top commanders, Abdul Malik, was part Pashtun. In 1997, playing on Malik's Pashtun loyalties, the Taliban were able to persuade Malik to defect from Dostum's militia. Recognizing the major implications of Malik's defection, Dostum consequently fled the country and the Taliban were able to enter Mazar-i Sharif with a significant strategic advantage.[73]

The insurgency quickly set to work installing a sharia government in Mazar-i Sharif and began to disarm and dismantle Malik's Uzbek militia. Angered by the Taliban's actions against his fighters and regretful of his betrayal, Malik mobilized his remaining forces to counterattack the Taliban. What ensued was an intense and devastating series of battles between Malik's forces and the Taliban. Eventually, the Taliban defeated Malik, but both sides suffered significant losses.

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[72] Res 1193, United Nations Security Council. (1998), http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1193.

[73] Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified*, 165.

Despite the loss of hundreds of fighters, the Taliban's success as Mazar-i Sharif caught the attention of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The three countries each declared the Taliban government the legitimate governing body in Afghanistan following the capture.[74]

2. Taliban Ideology and the West

Although Mazar-i Sharif represented a military success and led to the validation of the Taliban by several important Islamic nations, they continued to struggle on the domestic and international front. The fundamentalist religious ideology of the Taliban continued to directly affect the growth of their insurgency.

In the late 1990s and beginning of 2000, Omar genuinely pursued positive relationships with the U.S. and the western world. Omar's aspirations for the Taliban remained centered in the Afghan context, and he did not seek to expand his influence past the borders of Afghanistan unlike the goals of Osama bin Laden. In an attempt to appeal to the international community, especially the UN with whom they hoped to receive official recognition, the Taliban ordered the destruction of the poppy plant in the summer of 2000.

The poppy plant, which produces opium, supported many Afghan farmers and fueled the drug trade in and out of Afghanistan. Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership ordered the destruction of poppy fields throughout the country as it violated the Islamic tenants of their ideology. The adverse effects of the Taliban's decision were seen throughout the country as farmers lost their main source of income at the hands of the insurgency. However, the international community applauded the Taliban's efforts to decrease the international drug market.[75]

Furthermore, recognition of the Taliban government from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates led Omar to seek broader acceptance from the international community. Omar believed that recognition of his government would help to bring much-needed aid to Afghanistan which he could use to begin rebuilding the country. So, the

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[74] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, 154.

[75] Margolis, *War at the Top of the World*, 68–69.

Taliban extended several invitations to U.S. officials to discuss the future of U.S. and Afghan relations.

Still weary from the African embassy bombings and the Taliban's refusal to turn over bin Laden, the U.S. met with Taliban officials to discuss mutual terms for progress. After discussions with U.S. officials, the Taliban released information on their insurgency's main priorities, many of which directly coincided with the concerns of the U.S. and other western powers. Topics such as the fair treatment of women and the denouncement of state-sponsored terrorism were included in the list of Taliban priorities. The U.S., however, was unimpressed. They found the policies to be unconvincing as the Taliban viewed the topics through an Islamic perspective that did not satisfy western standards.[76] Failing to cement a positive relationship with the broader international community, the Taliban continued to face pressure from western sources.

In October of 1999, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1267, which placed sanctions on the those associated with bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization including the Taliban government which provided him safe-haven. The sanctions delivered a devastating blow to the already struggling Afghan economy. The sanctions also strengthened negative sentiments toward western governments who Mullah Omar now saw as directly objecting the establishment of the Taliban's Islamic government.[77] The sanctions worked as a final straw in the Taliban's attempts to seek international legitimacy and pushed the group closer to the Islamist supporters with whom they had previously attempted to keep at a distance, mainly bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network.

3. USS *Cole* Bombing

While Omar and the Taliban focused on appealing to foreign governments, bin Laden had been working diligently on his plans for two major attacks against U.S. assets. The first was against the USS *Cole*, a U.S. guided-missile destroyer refueling in the port city of Aden, Yemen, in October 2000. Three al-Qaeda insurgents loaded a small boat with

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[76] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, 160–161.

[77] Ibid., 174–175.

C4 explosives, drove the explosive-ridden boat within close proximity of the USS *Cole* and detonated the bombs, killing themselves and leaving a massive hole in the side of the ship. Seventeen American sailors were killed in the explosion and another thirty were injured.[78] The *Cole* bombing greatly intensified U.S. counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda who claimed responsibility for the attack. But, the presidential election of 2000 dominated U.S. political attention in November of 2000, and bin Laden prepared for his second, and much more lethal attack against the U.S.

D. SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, AND INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda associates perpetrated the largest terrorist attack ever carried out on U.S. soil. The hijacking and suicidal actions of the terrorists resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 American citizens and wounded several thousand more in New York City, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The international response to the attacks mobilized the entire global community to bring bin Laden and his terrorist network to justice. The intensified pursuit of bin Laden brought extreme pressure and attention to Afghanistan, where the Taliban continued to shelter the mastermind responsible for the attacks.

Newly elected U.S. President George W. Bush called on Mullah Omar to hand over bin Laden so that he may be brought to justice for the crimes committed against the United States. Omar refused demands for bin Laden's whereabouts, offering only to extradite him to a Muslim country where he would face charges in an Islamic court.[79] President Bush refused Omar's offer and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom commenced less than a month later on October 7, 2001.

While Mullah Omar recognized the possible repercussions of his connections to al-Qaeda in the wake of September 11, Omar refused to give up bin Laden without concrete proof that he was behind the attacks, which Omar believed the U.S. did not have.[80]

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[78] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 537.

[79] Margolis, *War at the Top of the World*, 76.

[80] Dick Camp, *Boots on the Ground: The Fight to Liberate Afghanistan from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, 2001–2002* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith, 2011), 99.

Furthermore, the U.S. adopted a mentality that those who did not support the U.S.' efforts to bring bin Laden to justice were considered enemies of the U.S. Therefore, Omar's failure to turn over bin Laden, due in part to *Pashtunwali* customs which call for unconditional protection of guests, led the U.S. to focusing their War on Terror on not only the al-Qaeda network but the Taliban as well.[81]

The Northern Alliance, who had steadily been establishing a relationship with the CIA, became integral in the U.S.' campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. A presidential finding signed by President Bush in the immediate aftermath of September 11, permitted the covert insertion of members of the CIA's Special Activities Divisions (SAD) and U.S. Operational Detachment Alphas (ODA) just days after the terrorist attack. On September 26, 2001, SAD paramilitary members began their assault in Afghanistan. The CIA used the regional expertise of the Northern Alliance to create relationships with important tribal leaders in northern Afghanistan and to gather intelligence for the larger American invasion that would occur in October 2001.

The initial bombing campaign led by the U.S. focused on eliminating the strategic headquarters of the Taliban and cutting off military resources to the insurgency. Dick Camp describes the first steps taken by the U.S. in his book *Boots on the Ground*. Camp writes:

> The bombing focused primarily on "Taliban air defenses, facilities physically and symbolically associated with Mullah Omar and UBL [Osama bin Laden], and al-Qaeda training camps," according to General DeLong. Strikes were reported in the capital, Kabul (where electricity was cut off), at the airport and military nerve center of Kandahar (home of the Taliban's Supreme Leader Mullah Omar), and also in the city of Jalalabad (military/terrorist training camps).[82]

The power of the modern American military and their coalition allies devastated the Taliban's mostly rural insurgency. While the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters could maneuver the Afghan terrain better any other force, they could not escape the precision of

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[81] Margolis, *War at the Top of the World*, 77.

[82] Camp, *Boots on the Ground*, 99–101.

U.S. airstrike capabilities as they hit airfields, training camps, high-valued leadership, and other important targets throughout the country.

By December of 2001, the U.S.-led coalition against the Taliban and al-Qaeda had effectively toppled the Taliban government in Afghanistan and had pushed their remaining forces into the mountains of Tora Bora along the Pakistani border. The cavernous networks within the mountains of Tora Bora provided bin Laden and Mullah Omar with an advantage as they attempted to escape from heavy fighting. CIA planners for the battle at Tora Bora told President Bush that no army in the world could completely seal the mountain range to prevent the Taliban and al-Qaeda's escape.[83] Months later, U.S. officials would state that several thousand additional troops would have been required to effectively prevent bin Laden and Omar's escape. Recognizing that the terrorists were weak, tired, and seemingly cornered in the mountains, the CIA pleaded with American military planners to send more troops and air power to complete a final sweep of the remaining insurgents. However, the U.S. military denied the CIA's requests in fear of angering the Afghan population with a large military insertion, and thus, Omar and bin Laden were able to escape across the border into Pakistan.[84]

E. CONCLUSION

Mullah Omar and his Taliban insurgency amassed significant territorial gains and political legitimacy within Afghanistan between 1994 and 1997 due to strategic planning and ample military resources. As the priorities and responsibilities of the Taliban shifted in 1997 to accommodate the vast new territory under their control, the insurgency struggled to adapt. Seeking new alliances and resources, the Taliban entered into a partnership with Osama bin Laden, which would prove to be one of the insurgencies most defining moments.

The Taliban's failed attempts to facilitate agreements and alliances with the international community and the increasing antagonist actions of bin Laden in Afghanistan

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[83] Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2018), 103.

[84] Ibid., 105.

led to extreme levels of international pressure. Following the terrorist actions of al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, and Mullah Omar's refusal to turn bin Laden over to U.S. authorities, an action that some of the Taliban's moderate fighters did not support, the Taliban regime was effectively toppled during Operation Enduring Freedom.

However, the lessons learned by Mullah Omar and the rest of the Taliban leadership during this period would influence new strategies and ideologies as the organization regrouped and prepared to return to Afghanistan.

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IV. TACTICAL INNOVATION

In the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban insurgency was a shadow of its pre-2001 regime. Mullah Omar disappeared into the mountains of Pakistan with what remained of his core leadership. The U.S.-led coalition lost only twelve soldiers during OEF, liberated every territory that was previously under Taliban control, and destroyed the military capabilities and logistical networks the insurgency had spent eight years creating.[85]

Political and military leaders in the U.S. celebrated the hasty defeat of the Taliban and focused on creating a democratic Afghan government and developing infrastructure that would bring stability to the country. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, announced the end to major conflict in Afghanistan in 2003 and closed the metaphorical book on the existence of the Taliban insurgency. In fact, Rumsfeld had initiated planning for the invasion of Iraq while the battle in Tora Bora was still taking place in November 2001.[86] So, as the Taliban retreated into Pakistan, the U.S. began to redirect counterinsurgency efforts toward planning for their next military endeavor.

In Pakistan, the Taliban insurgency was injured, but it was not defeated. Mullah Omar slowly began planning and organizing for the Taliban's eventual return to Afghanistan. Consequently, the period between 2002 and 2009 marks the most innovative and adaptive period in the Taliban insurgency. Psychologically motivated by their defeat at the hands of the U.S., the Taliban worked persistently in Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan to find new lethal and inventive measures to defeat the modern military capabilities of the U.S.

When the Taliban re-emerged in Afghanistan in the summer of 2004, they had a reinvigorated spirit, strengthened ideology, and destructive new technologies that dealt a

[85] Ibid., 110.

[86] Coll, *Directorate S,* 102.

devastating blow to U.S. counterinsurgency forces in the country and walked back the progress of three years of U.S. nation-building efforts.

A. THE BONN AGREEMENT

The removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan led to the need for a new governing body in Kabul. Accordingly, the U.S. and UN helped to facilitate the Bonn Agreement, officially known as the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, in December of 2001. The conference, held in Bonn, Germany, was intended to appoint an interim government that would eventually form a long-term, democratically-elected government for Afghanistan. The convention included representatives from the numerous ethnic groups throughout Afghanistan in hopes of creating an inclusive government that would guard against the outbreak of another civil war.

The interim government, led by Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, was to govern for six months at which point a traditional Afghan council, called a *loya jirga*, would convene to elect a transitional government body.[87] Karzai was not a new face in the Afghan political sphere, his father had been a member of parliament prior to the Soviet invasion, and Hamid considered himself a political analyst.[88] When the Taliban first emerged in the mid-1990s, Karzai supported the insurgency, even giving money and weaponry to the cause. However, as the Taliban became more violent and oppressive, Karzai's father began to speak out against the insurgency. In 1999, Taliban operatives killed Karzai's father due to his negative public remarks against the group. As the Taliban's reign of terror continued, Karzai became a potential leader for a Pashtun-led resistance to the Taliban.[89] The CIA maintained a relationship with Karzai throughout the early 2000s. So, when the Bonn conference convened, Karzai arrived in Bonn groomed by U.S. intelligence experts to lead the post-Taliban reconstruction of Afghanistan.

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[87] Thomas H. Johnson, "The Prospects for Post-Conflict Afghanistan: A Call of the Sirens to the Country's Troubled Past," *Strategic Insights* 5, no. 2 (February 2006), https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a485125.pdf.

[88] Coll, *Directorate S*, 94-96.

[89] Ibid.

When Hamid Karzai returned to Afghanistan following the Bonn Agreement, he began to create policy within the country. One of his decisions included the distribution of government responsibilities to regional leaders throughout the country. In theory, Karzai's plan would work to satisfy the divisions among Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal groups by empowering local leaders. However, what resulted was eerily similar to the situation following the removal of Soviet troops in the 1980s. Theo Farrell describes the fallout of Karzai's decision:

> In this way, the corrupt warlords who had been pushed out of power by the Taliban in the 1990s returned as local governors and police chiefs. Under the guise of officialdom, these reincarnated figures once again stole from and abused the population. This, in turn, provided fertile ground for the gradual return of the Taliban into southern and eastern Afghanistan beginning in 2004.[90]

The legitimacy given to regional governors through Karzai's policies returned the countryside of Afghanistan to the post-Soviet lawlessness that inspired the rise of the Taliban nearly a decade earlier. These corrupt leaders then appointed their cronies to other important positions within their regional administrations and thus the larger government structure weakened in functionality and validity.[91]

In major cities, Karzai's government attempted to return modernity that had been turned back by the destruction of infrastructure and strict anti-technology policies of the Taliban regime.[92] Although, systemic corruption of the Karzai administration limited positive growth and primed the political environment of Afghanistan for the return of the Taliban. Counterinsurgency efforts of the U.S. focused on assisting Karzai in rebuilding Afghanistan, meanwhile, the Taliban were quietly reorganizing across the border.

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[90] Theo Farrell, "Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation and the Afghan Taliban," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 63, http://hdl.handle.net/2152/65639.

[91] Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2008), 17.

[92] Coll, *Directorate* S, 115.

B. RETURN OF THE TALIBAN: 2001–2004

Despite suffering from battle injuries and the psychological effects of rapid defeat, the Taliban continued to adapt their insurgency in 2002. Various accounts of the initial actions taken to revive the insurgency exist.[93] However, most accounts note that members of the original insurgency were reluctant to return to conflict. Some Taliban fighters had escaped across borders during OEF and others hid in plain sight by reintegrating into Afghan society. So, the Taliban reached out to new recruits, forming what Antonio Giustozzi has labeled the "Neo-Taliban."

The reinvigorated insurgency was assembled from multiple sources throughout the region. Taliban leadership mobilized recruiters to find volunteers in refugee camps, mosques, Pashtun villages throughout Afghanistan, and madrasas throughout the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) of Pakistan.[94]

1. *Shabnamah*—Night Letters

When the insurgency amassed enough fighters, they slowly began their campaign to regain influence of Afghans throughout the country. Reappearing outside of their former strategic headquarters in 2002, Steve Coll describes the calculated return of the Taliban to Afghanistan:

> The first Taliban *Shabnamah*, or night letters—typically handwritten death threats posted in mosques or slipped under doorways—appeared to the east of Kandahar late in 2002, near the Pakistani border. They made reference to the history of the Afghan resistance against foreign invaders, great heroes of the past, and Islamic theology. They threatened death to anyone who worked with the United States or the government in Kabul. Taliban runners tacked them on mosque walls or private doorways, or demanded that local notables read them aloud.[95]

The Taliban's choice to use *Shabnamah* was a deliberate decision that appealed to historical and tribal traditions of the Afghan people, especially those in rural regions from

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[93] Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 37.

[94] Ibid., 37-38.

[95] Coll, *Directorate S*, 144.

where the Taliban drew large parts of their insurgency. As Thomas H. Johnson notes, the letters were also the most effective means of reaching the highly-illiterate rural communities who depended on oral communication. Furthermore, the narratives of Afghan heroes and allusions to the anti-Soviet jihad worked to mobilize Afghans against U.S. troops.[96] The Taliban's understanding of the Afghan people and their culture, as evidenced by the issuance of night letters, was an integral aspect of the insurgency's return and future success against culturally-deaf counterinsurgents.

Reminiscent of Mao Tse-tung's, *On Guerilla Warfare*, night letters signify one of the first and most important strategic markers of the Taliban's new insurgent methodology. Having suffered catastrophic losses in their fight against the modern U.S. military in 2001, the Taliban recognized the need to use guerilla tactics to counter the strength and lethality of conventional U.S. forces.

2. Intelligence Networks

Although the Taliban had found new ways to appeal to rural Afghans, they lacked the forces and equipment needed to effectively counter U.S. troops in armed engagements. Unlike the unity they cultivated in the mid-1990s, the recruits of the "Neo-Taliban" were disordered, indiscriminately violent, and struggled to create a positive environment among their ranks.[97] Coupled with inferior troop numbers, these factors detracted from the overall military success of the insurgency as they attempted to reestablish control in southern Afghanistan.

To counter the inefficiency of their militias, the Taliban developed extensive networks for intelligence throughout the Afghan countryside. Capitalizing on the lawlessness of regional governments due to Karzai's policies, the Taliban connected with tribal villagers as they had against the mujahedeen warlords in the earliest days of the insurgency. Giustozzi notes the importance of these networks, explaining, "While unable

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[96] Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 2017), 53-57.

[97] Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Adaptation 2002-2001: A Case of Evolution?" *Cliodynamics* 3, no. 1 (2012): 109, https://doi.org/10.21237/C7clio3111784.

to convince even most of their former members to re-mobilize for war, the Taliban managed to obtain from them valuable intelligence on the political situation, the divisions among their enemies and the grievances of the population, which they set out to exploit."[98]

The intelligence networks created in the early period of the Taliban's reemergence would come to support the insurgency for the next decade of conflict. Furthermore, the Taliban's ability to recognize their military shortfalls and to adapt their strategy to support their strengths shows the growing sophistication of their tactics.

3. Organization

After taking control of Kabul in 1996, Mullah Omar slowly learned the importance of organization and structure in managing his widespread insurgency. In 2003, Omar worked to prevent similar issues and created a council of confidants to help supervise the growing arms of the Taliban. In *On Guerilla Warfare*, Mao highlights the importance of a divisional structure writing:

> In guerrilla warfare, small units acting independently play the principal role, and there must be no excessive interference with their activities…Only adjacent guerrilla units can coordinate their activities to any degree. Strategically, their activities can be roughly correlated with those of regular forces, and tactically, they must cooperate with adjacent units of the regular army.[99]

Omar's council appointed leaders for matters regarding finance, military operations, governance, religion, and other important divisions, but allowed basic forces to work somewhat independently.[100] The new organization allowed Omar to oversee the movements of the insurgency but gave him the freedom to focus a majority of his attention on grand strategy.

At first, the organizational structure implemented by Omar lacked continuity as U.S. forces killed or captured high-ranking Taliban operatives in charge of Taliban

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[98] Ibid., 110.

[99] Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 52.

[100] Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 89-90.

divisions. However, by the mid-2000s, the structure evolved into a hierarchy of local, regional, and executive leaders. So, if a Taliban insurgent was eliminated, his position could efficiently be filled by the lower-level leader.

From 2001 to 2004, the Taliban utilized a trial-and-error method as they worked to revolutionize their insurgency. Taliban leadership found tactics and methods that worked with the ideological goals of the insurgency and then adapted them to ensure optimal success. This period of experimentation was integral in the success that the Taliban enjoyed from 2005-2009.

C. THE HEIGHT OF TALIBAN INNOVATION: 2005–2009

Mullah Omar and his council of leadership had spent several years compiling extensive research on the U.S. military and their fighting doctrines, developing lethal technologies, and fine-tuning the logistical networks of their insurgency. In 2005, the profits of their labor were apparent as the Taliban swept across Afghanistan and dealt consecutive and significant attacks on coalition forces in the country.

The period between 2005 and 2009 illustrates the epitome of Taliban adaptation and innovation.[101] Compiling the lessons of the first decade of their insurgency, especially their swift defeat by OEF forces, Mullah Omar modified the Taliban's ideologies and methodologies to return as a more effective insurgency in pursuit of their goals.

1. Utilization of Improvised Explosive Devices and Suicide Bombers

One of the most lethal adaptations made by the Taliban was the development of low-cost improvised explosive device (IED) technologies and the use of suicide bombers. In 2005, the Taliban met with a group of insurgents traveling from Iraq to Afghanistan. These insurgents brought with them information regarding the successful employment of IEDs and suicide bombing against American troops in Iraq.[102] The use of such strategies in Afghanistan was uncommon, but the Taliban were in need of new measures to counter

[101] Thomas H. Johnson, "Taliban Adaptations and Innovations," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 1 (2013): 3-27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2013.740228.

[102] Ibid., 10.

the conventional U.S. military. The insurgent's employment of these tactics resulted in nearly half of American casualties in Iraq in the early and mid-2000s.[103] Recognizing the strategic advantage these devices had, the Taliban began to incorporate the tactics into their new fighting doctrine.

IEDs revolutionized Taliban tactics due to their efficient and inexpensive nature. The supplies needed to build IEDs were often found around the house and could be connected to basic remote-activating devices. A report conducted by the Congressional Research Service explains the simplicity of IED technology, "Triggering methods include using a cell phone, a garage door opener, or a child's radio-controlled toy, or may be as simple as running over a rubber hose to produce enough air pressure to activate a detonating switch."[104] Additionally, the remote activation of IEDs allowed the Taliban to detonate the bombs will concealing themselves from counter-fire and blast shrapnel. Although the bombs were low cost to the insurgents who utilized them, they resulted in the destruction of million dollar armored vehicles and the loss of hundreds of U.S. service members' lives.

The Taliban also found new ways to pair IED technology with the deadly effects of suicide bombers. Using remote detonating devices, the Taliban could detonate suicide vests in crowded public centers to illustrate the Afghan government's inability to protect its citizens.[105] Despite ethical questions raised within the Taliban leadership circles, the effectiveness of IEDs and suicide bombing could not be ignored. As a result, a 500% increase in the use of these tactics occurred in in 2006.[106]

The Taliban's implementation of IEDs and suicide bombings illustrates the insurgency's willingness to adjust their cultural practices to meet their political and military objectives and shows the substantial evolution in the group's policies since 1994.

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[103] Clay Wilson, *Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in Iraq and Afghanistan: Effects and Countermeasures*, CRS Report No. RS22330 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006), 1, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a456446.pdf.

[104] Ibid., 2.

[105] Johnson, "Taliban Adaptations and Innovations," 12.

[106] Ibid.

2. Ambushes and Small Group Tactics

Although the Taliban used innovative new tactics like IEDs and suicide bombers to assist their military campaigns, in many regions the Taliban still fought like a conventional force. Outnumbered and overpowered by large coalition forces and modern weaponry, these tactics often led to mass casualties within the Taliban ranks.[107]

Describing the movements of small insurgent groups, Mao writes:

> The leader must be like the fisherman, who, with his nets, is able both to cast them and to pull them out in awareness of the depth of the water, the strength of the current, or the presence of any obstructions that may foul them. As the fisherman controls his nets through the lead ropes, so the guerrilla leader maintains contact with and control over his units. As the fisherman must change his position, so must the guerrilla commander. Dispersion, concentration, constant change of position—it is in these ways the guerrillas employ their strength.[108]

Taliban forces were outnumbered in Afghanistan, but they were experts of the Afghan landscape and found new ways to exploit their knowledge effectively against counterinsurgents. As Mao advises, the Taliban began to move quickly through the mountainous territories of the country and planned attacks and ambushes that they could control. Meanwhile, U.S. conventional forces moved sluggishly, weighed down by heavy equipment, hindered by poor roadways, and slowed by constant sweeps for IEDs. The slow movements of the counterinsurgents allowed Taliban units to trap conveys, retreat, and quickly move insurgents to their next location for preparation of continued attacks.

3. Airstrikes

U.S. troops in Afghanistan quickly grew frustrated with the Taliban's new tactics as suffered from high numbers of American casualties as the Taliban disappeared into the Afghan villages seemingly uninjured. In response, the U.S. increased patrols and attempted to draw the Taliban out with an increased presence throughout the country.

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[107] Farrell, "Unbeatable," 70-71.

[108] Mao, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 101-102.

Additionally, American military strategists began to favor the use of airstrikes in Afghanistan in hopes of targeting Taliban forces while lessening the number of American servicemen at risk on the ground. However, instead of eliminating Taliban forces and leadership, coalition airstrikes resulted in the collateral deaths of Afghan civilians. In 2006 alone, coalition airstrikes were responsible for the deaths of over 100 Afghans. In 2007, that number tripled to over 300 Afghans killed by airstrikes.[109] The fallout of Afghan casualties from coalition airstrikes was substantial. International organizations grew progressively critical of U.S. military policies, the Afghan government began to speak out against U.S. efforts in the country, and Afghan locals increasingly resented the presence of OEF troops in Afghanistan.[110]

D. THE SURGE AND U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE

In his 2009 article "One Tribe at a Time: A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan," U.S. Army Major, Jim Gant, described the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. He explains:

> Time is not on our side considering the current level of blood and treasure that we are expending. A war of exhaustion is unacceptable and a war of annihilation is not feasible. We do not have the patience or the resources to stay on our current course. The sophistication of Taliban attacks in Afghanistan has risen in the last two years to a point where we can clearly see that they will continue to adapt to our strategies and tactics.[111]

The criticisms mentioned in Gant's article were also concerns of American military planners in 2009. The U.S. recognized the failures of their counterinsurgency strategy, modeled mostly after doctrines used in Vietnam, and attempted to create a new doctrine that would finally eliminate Taliban influence and bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

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109 Marc Garlasco, *"Troops in Contact" Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan,* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2008), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0908webwcover_0.pdf.

110 Ibid.

111 Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time: The Paper that Changed the War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Black Irish Books, 2014), 36.

In January 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama took office and immediately began strategizing for the war in Afghanistan, which he vowed to end while campaigning for the oval office. The policy that emerged from the White House called for a surge in U.S. troops to Afghanistan, adding nearly 30,000 servicemen and women on the ground in Afghanistan. Obama's plan was to increase troop presence for roughly one year to overwhelm Taliban forces, then facilitate the gradual removal of troops from the country with the exception of peacekeepers and government advisors.[112]

In coordination with the surge in troops, the U.S. began implementing Field Manual 3-24. The Field Manual was written by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in 2006 and focused on filling a decades-long doctrinal gap in counterinsurgency doctrine.[113] In other words, the U.S. military had been operating in Afghanistan for eight years without a warfighting doctrine specific to the country's landscape, culture, religion, or people. A fact the Taliban had capitalized on for eight years.[114]

FM 3-24 recognized the failures in U.S. policies in Afghanistan and called on the literature and expertise of major counterinsurgency specialists to explain the way forward for future engagements. However, the suggestions within the field manual countered traditional military norms, placed new responsibilities in the hands of low-ranking soldiers, and focused on social and cultural expertise not trained in boot camp.[115] Academic critics of FM 3-24 noted that doctrine pared down broader social and cultural concepts in an attempt to simplify theories, but in turn over generalized important ideas.[116] Moreover, FM 3-24 highlighted the expensive and protracted nature of counterinsurgency success despite rapidly decreasing public support and record-hitting military budgets at home.

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112 Peter Baker, "How Obama Came to Plan for 'Surge' in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, December 5, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html.

113 Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006), https://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps79762/FM_3-24.pdf.

114 Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, 217-218.

115 James Hasík, "Outside Their Expertise: The Implications of Field Manual 3-24 for the Professional Military Education of Non-Commissioned Officers," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 5-6 (2014): 1057-1058, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/09592318.2014.945679.

116 Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2013), 38.

E. CONCLUSION

Between 2004 and 2009, the Taliban reached the pinnacle of adaptation as the U.S. and coalition troops struggled to achieve progress against IEDs, suicide bombers, ambushes, rapidly maneuvering small groups, and decreasing Afghan and international support. Learning from the mistakes of early 2000, Mullah Omar and the Taliban systematically modified nearly every aspect of their insurgency to counter the modern military power of the U.S. and their allies.

It should be noted that the Taliban did see periods of weakness during this time. Bitterness between regional commanders, distaste over oppressive sharia laws and fundamentalist ideologies, and the capture or killing of many Taliban operatives occurred throughout the early and mid-2000s.[117] These difficulties led to new stresses on the Taliban organization, especially among the top-level leadership. Nevertheless, the insurgency found ways to mitigate the drawbacks of these weaknesses and continued to wage their jihad against the U.S. will overwhelming success.

As the U.S. refocused their efforts on supporting the governmental infrastructure and political stability of Afghanistan, recommendations highlighted in FM 3-24, the Taliban were again forced to evolve their insurgency.

[117] Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2009), 114-116.

V. POLITICAL INGENUITY

The political atmosphere in Afghanistan in 2010 was highly fragmented and riddled with corruption, signs that not much had changed since 1992. After serving as the transitional president of Afghanistan following the Bonn Agreement, Hamid Karzai was democratically elected as President of Afghanistan in 2004. He immediately set to work on enhancing the economic and political infrastructure in Afghanistan, with the help of the United States and the international community. Millions of dollars of aid flooded into Afghanistan to support development projects that were intended to bring Afghanistan into the 21st century and neutralize the influence of the Taliban. However, the mismanagement of money, the inefficiency of Afghan governmental ministries, and the continued threat of violence prohibited meaningful progress.

Again, following the guidelines set forward in Mao's *On Guerilla Warfare*, the Taliban transformed their organization to meet the growing needs of the insurgency. Mao advises:

> The soldier must be educated politically. There must be a gradual change from guerrilla formations to orthodox regimental organization. The necessary bureaus and staffs, both political and military, must be provided. At the same time, attention must be paid to the creation of sustainable supply, medical, and hygiene units.[118]

While the government of Afghanistan attempted to modernize and liberalize, the Taliban set out to revolutionize their structure and ideologies as well. Organizational alterations that began in 2008 transitioned the Taliban away from a patrimonial structure and more towards a centralized structure.[119] This substantial change paved the way for a more uniformed and effective Taliban political divisions. Additionally, the Taliban began to adopt new ideologies in matters such as governance, technology, and public services that would allow them to undermine progress made by the central government in Kabul.

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[118] Mao, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 113.

[119] Antonio Giustozzi, "Military Adaptation by the Taliban, 2002-2011," in *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, ed. Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell (Stanford CA: Stanford University, 2013), 259-260.

These changes, when compared to the Taliban of 1994, illustrate the ideological and political ingenuity of the Taliban from 2010 to 2019.

A. TALIBAN CODE OF CONDUCT

In 2010, the Taliban issued a code of conduct, or *layeha*, for their fighters that outlined acceptable insurgent practices throughout their organization in Afghanistan. The 2010 *layeha* was not the first code of conduct issued by Taliban leadership. Previous *layeha* editions were distributed in 2006 and 2009. However, the 2010 edition was far more expansive and detailed than previous versions. The updated code called for the development of new Taliban ideologies and signified a shift in the insurgency's priorities.

Major topics of the 2010 *layeha* include the growth of network communications, increasing public support, the importance of political commissions, and an emphasis on the defection of government personnel.[120] Furthermore, the code prohibited actions such as kidnapping and extortion, which were previously common practices among insurgents. Now, the Taliban believed such actions damaged the insurgency's image. The removal of indiscriminate violence and corruption were also major shifts that worked to change the culture of the Taliban in Afghanistan and to bring legitimacy to their movement.

Discussing the narratives utilized by the Taliban organization, Johnson describes the need for an organizational shift:

> The Taliban have suffered politically from engaging in barbaric, ultra-violent, and un-Islamic methods such as beheadings and mutilating civilians. While this method may have short-term advantages in garnering support from certain foreign donors or outbidding among competing insurgent groups, it has had detrimental long-term strategic effects on Taliban efforts at gaining support among rural comminutes.[121]

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120 Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew C. DuPee, "Analysing the New Taliban Code of Conduct (Layeha): An Assessment of Changing Perspectives and Strategies of the Afghan Taliban," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (March 2012): 81, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2012.647844.

121 Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, 192.

The recognition of the pitfalls mentioned by Johnson led to the sweeping changes of the revised code of conduct. This particular adaptation made by the Taliban was necessary for further progress in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the 2010 *layeha* represents a major shift in the Taliban organization towards becoming a multifaceted government equipped with the resources and programs necessary to support a population. The appointment of governors with civil-service experience and the emphasis on efficient political processes show the Taliban's desire to undermine the political structures of the central government in Afghanistan.[122]

B. U.S. LOSES PUBLIC SUPPORT

In contrast to the evolving Taliban code of conduct, the U.S. faced new challenges in Afghanistan as members of the military irreparably damaged U.S.-Afghan relations.

As more troops arrived in Afghanistan as a part of the surge, the U.S. hoped to bolster Afghan security efforts and to restore stability and peace to Afghan towns throughout the country. Utilizing FM 3-24, members of OEF attempted to cultivate relationships with Afghan villagers as a means of reducing Taliban influence and coercion. However, despite the cultural and religious sensitivity addressed in FM 3-24, U.S. forces in Afghanistan faced severe criticism following three appalling events between 2011 and 2012.

In the summer of 2011, as the Taliban discussed the possibility of talks with the U.S. and Afghan governments, a video surfaced of four U.S. Marines urinating on the dead bodies of several Taliban insurgents. The video was posted online and viewed by Afghans throughout the country. President Karzai called for stern punishment of the Marines, the Taliban issued a statement that referred to the acts as "in contradiction with all human and ethical norms," and led to increases in anti-American sentiment among Afghans throughout the country.[123]

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[122] Ibid., 85.

[123] Graham Bowley and Matthew Rosenberg, "Video Inflames a Delicate Moment for U.S. in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 12, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/world/asia/video-said-to-show-marines-urinating-on-taliban-corpses.html.

In February 2012, U.S. officials at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan authorized the burning of Qurans that they believed were being used by prisoners to pass messages. The Quran is the holiest text of the Islamic religion, and it's burning enraged Muslims around the world an especially those in Afghanistan. When news of the burning reached the press, riots formed around the country resulting in the deaths of nearly thirty people and injuring dozens more.[124]

In March 2012, Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales left his base in Panjwai, Afghanistan, and walked into several Afghan homes shooting and burning the bodies of sixteen Afghans, nine of which were children.[125] The event became known as the Panjwai Massacre and considerably impacted U.S.-Afghan relations in the region.

Each of these acts received a large amount of media attention in Afghanistan and around the world. Afghans lost trust in American motives and many rioted outside military bases calling for an end to U.S. involvement in the country.

The Taliban, however, in line with their new code of conduct, were able to capitalize on the mistakes of the U.S. military. Taliban insurgents continued narratives that the U.S. was against the religion of Islam.

C. GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

While the U.S. attempted to repair relationships with Afghans in the wake of the events of 2011 and 2012, the Taliban worked to build on anti-American feelings within the country. In line with the objectives outlined in the 2010 *layeha*, the Taliban began to focus on the growth of social programs around this time. Educational opportunities, healthcare systems and attempts to provide justice began to spread in Taliban-controlled territories

124 "Six Dead in Afghanistan Koran Burning Protests," *BBC News*, February 22, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17123464.

125 "How it Happened: Massacre in Kandahar," *BBC News*, March 17, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17334643.

around 2011, and the popularity of such efforts increased as the U.S. lost legitimacy in the region.[126]

1. Transformed Taliban Methodology

The Taliban of the late 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by oppressive violence, removal of modern technology, destruction of education facilities, and poor healthcare. But, as the government of Afghanistan received aid and assistance to provide social welfare programs to Afghans, the Taliban's earlier policies could no longer support the goals of the insurgency. Therefore, they set out to create a structure that would win over the population, as they had in 1994.

In a report conducted by the Overseas Development Institute, the author explains the actions taken by the Taliban to enter the political arena in Afghanistan. The report explains:

> Provisions recommending attacks on teachers, schools and NGOs were replaced by stipulations compelling adherence to the 'policies' of the Islamic Emirate, including education…Attitudes toward aid agencies and service providers also appear to have shifted…a letter issued in Mullah Omar's name, and similar letters or directives for subsequent campaigns, instructed fighters to allow vaccinations and urged parents to have their children vaccinated…By 2011, the Taliban leadership had signed agreements with at least 26 aid organisations and elaborated a clear central policy for negotiating with NGOs.[127]

The vast modifications to Taliban policies represent a major shift in the evolution of the Taliban insurgency, further supporting the sophistication of the organization. The Taliban of 1998, who struggled to support Afghans and provide services without the help of the international community, were now partnering with major aid organizations to bring education and healthcare to tribal citizens. At the highest level, commissions on finance, health, education, and a three-tiered judicial commission were led by the main leadership council. Provincial and district councils worked under the main council to govern territories

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[126] Ashley Jackson, *Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Overseas Development Institute, 2018), 6, https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12269.pdf.

[127] Ibid., 8.

in line with leadership's directives. At the lowest level, district councils even had means for appointing mayors, selecting school and medical monitors, and collecting taxes.[128]

The benefits of the Taliban's new policies were most apparent in the rural regions of Afghanistan where the central government struggled to provide timely judiciary decisions. Johnson and DuPee note that the Taliban's judicial system "represents a parallel legal system that is acknowledged by local communities as being legitimate, fair, free of bribery, and swift," which were qualities not used by many Afghans to describe the judicial processes in Kabul.[129] A rural farmer filing an appeal over land rights would wait months or even years before a decision was made in Kabul regarding the farmer's appeal. The Taliban were able to provide immediate judicial decisions, allowing the Afghans to return to their farms and work without the bureaucratic lag that was characteristic of Karzai's government.

2. Death of Mullah Omar

In the summer of 2015, the Taliban revealed that their Supreme Leader, Mullah Omar died two years prior in 2013. Questions regarding Omar's replacement and the future of the insurgency reportedly led to a decline in the progress of Taliban objectives.[130]

Furthermore, some Taliban have completely broken off from the greater insurgency structure. Fighters in some regions work independently from the directives issued by the new Taliban leadership in order to pursue their own specific goals.[131]

However, the announcement of Omar's death came as the U.S. and coalition forces committed to a drawdown in military presence in Afghanistan. Subsequently, the Taliban were given a period of decreased conflict to regroup following the leader's death and to prepare for the future of the group.

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128 Ibid., 12.

129 Johnson and. DuPee, "Analysing the New Taliban Code of Conduct," 84.

130 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Blood and Faith in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Felbab-Brown-Paper-BLOOD-AND-FAITH-IN-AFGHANISTAN-May-2016.pdf.

131 Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure*, 17.

3. Ashraf Ghani as President of Afghanistan

After serving as President of Afghanistan for thirteen years, Hamid Karzai was replaced by Ashraf Ghani who won the contested democratic election of 2014. The election received international attention for accusations of corruption and fraud.[132] Due to discrepancies in election results Ghani, and the next highest vote-getter, Abdullah Abdullah, agreed to a power-sharing partnership. Ghani received the title of president and Abdullah was named as his chief executive. In a run-off election to establish a majority winner, nearly one million votes were labeled invalid and thrown out of consideration.[133]

The government of Afghanistan under the direction of President Ghani has seen a considerable decline. Although Ghani calls his administration the National Unity Government, the country is more fragmented than it has been in nearly a decade. Afghans are increasingly angry with the poor security state, lack of peace, a stagnating economy, and institutional corruption that stopped progress within the country.[134]

In attempts to create peace with the Taliban, Ghani spent a considerable period of his early presidency struggling to conduct negotiations with insurgency leadership.[135] However, peace talks and cease-fire agreements with insurgent forces were consistently unsuccessful. Often times, the Taliban used ceasefires to reorganize and reequip fighters before continuing assaults on territories. Additionally, the Taliban continued to exploit the failures of the central government and while promoting the efficiency of their shadow government structure.

A report conducted by the Brookings Institute cited interviews with Afghans, finding that, "the modern and presumably transformative Afghan generation would be

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132 Thomas H. Johnson, "The Illusion of Afghanistan's Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Election," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 1 (2018), 2, https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/09592318.2018.1404771.

133 "Commission Releases Disputed 2014 Afghan Election Results," *Reuters*, February 24, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-election/commission-releases-disputed-2014-afghan-election-results-idUSKCN0VX1O8.

134 Tabish Forugh, "Afghanistan's Uprising for Change: Time to Shatter Ghani's Delusion," *Diplomat*, June 27, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/afghanistans-uprising-for-change-time-to-shatter-ghanis-delusion/.

135 Felbab-Brown, Blood and Faith in Afghanistan.

willing to settle for some form of Taliban rule, though with limits to the Taliban's power, with the hope that the Taliban in power would be less corrupt than the post-2001 Afghan politicians."[136] The appeal of the Taliban government illustrates the substantial progress in the Taliban's goals of undermining the National Unity Government.

4. U.S. Presidential Election of 2016

In November 2016, the U.S. elected Donald Trump as President. Historically, Trump was unsupportive of the U.S.' continued involvement in Afghanistan. On the campaign trail, he campaigned for the removal of U.S. troops in the run-up to his election.

Despite his campaign promises, the Trump administration's policy for Afghanistan shifted significantly after taking office in 2017. In August 2017, President Trump announced his Afghanistan strategy, which called for an increase of troops to the country, reminiscent of the smaller-scale surge strategies of the Obama administration. Trump's new strategy hoped to push back insurgent forces, promote stability, and develop the capabilities of Afghan security forces.

The next month, in September 2017, the U.S. military carried out over 700 airstrikes in Afghanistan, the highest strike numbers since 2010.[137] But, as seen before, the airstrikes had adverse effects and resulted in an increase of civilian casualties.

Changing their strategy again, in July 2018, the Trump Administration announced their desire to engage in direct negotiations with the Afghan Taliban. A decision that inherently gives significant political legitimacy to the Taliban organization in Afghanistan. The administration's initial timeline called for a peace deal by April 2019, prior to Afghanistan's presidential election planned for September 2019.

Spearheaded by the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. and Taliban have met several times throughout 2018 and 2019 to discuss the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban have stated that the removal of all U.S.

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[136] Ibid.

[137] Jack Moore, "Trump's Afghanistan Troop Surge is Complete, Raising Total Number of U.S. Servicemen to 14,000," *Newsweek*, November 17, 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/trumps-afghanistan-troop-surge-complete-raising-total-number-us-servicemen-714588.

military troops in Afghanistan must occur before political negotiations would begin. For the U.S. to consider the peace talks a success, the Taliban must agree to prevent the growth or sheltering of international terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

While the U.S. and Taliban leaders have met several times, they have excluded delegations from Afghanistan's government in their negotiations. The Taliban have refused to meet with an official delegation from President Ghani's administration as they believe his presidency is illegitimate.[138]

D. CONCLUSION

Between 2010 and 2019, the Taliban organization fundamentally transformed from a military insurgency into a political organization that rivaled the central government of Afghanistan. The death of the insurgency's spiritual leader, Mullah Omar, slowed the insurgency only momentarily.

Continued recognition of strengths and weaknesses in the Taliban's structure, methodology, and ideology have allowed the insurgency to adapt and benefit from changes occurring throughout Afghanistan in the last several years.

Nearly two decades after U.S. forces obliterated the Taliban regime, representatives from both sides of the conflict sit together in negotiations for peace. While the Taliban has suffered from several phases of dominance and retreat, their ability to evolve into a multi-layered political entity has ensured their long-term existence in Afghanistan.

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[138] Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations," *New York Times*, July 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html?module=inline.

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VI. CONCLUSION

As of June 2019, the Taliban have not reached a deal with U.S. negotiators, although officials claim an agreement could come very soon. The Taliban insist on the complete removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, while the U.S. demands a pledge to prevent the use of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorist networks. In May 2019, the U.S. and Taliban spokespeople announced "positive and constructive" progress in their sixth round of negotiations.[139]

While positive negotiations with the U.S. could bring American troops home from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of war, the stability of Afghanistan is still questionable. The absence of Afghan political leadership in peace talks signifies a major missing piece in the future of the country and shows the U.S.' failure to learn from their mistakes in Vietnam. Only two years after the U.S. negotiated with North Vietnamese troops, without the presence of South Vietnamese officials, the government fell in 1975.[140] The deliberate exclusion of Ghani's administration is not a positive marker for success in Afghanistan even if the U.S. and Taliban representatives reach an agreement amongst themselves.

Although the Taliban have evolved and adapted to the changing Afghan environment, much of the country mirrors the conditions of the 1990s. The ethnic and tribal divisions that separated Afghanistan and gave way to the rise of the Taliban are still present. Political representatives struggle to support the majority of the electorate as ethnic groups support their own agendas and candidates. Corruption among political groups continues to hinder progress as it did after the removal of Soviet political figures in 1992. Democratic elections in Afghanistan have continually been delayed due to violence and corruption, especially by President Ghani and his administration. Intervention by international organizations and governments fail to create long-lasting progress, similar to the efforts of

139 Ibid.

140 "Afghanistan Talks Sound A Lot Like 'Peace with Honor' Ending to the Vietnam War," *USA Today*, February 10, 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/02/10/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban-vietnam-war-editorials-debates/2776978002/.

the Clinton administration and UN in the late 1990s. Despite several trillions of dollars of aid and decades of American intervention, the country continually fails to provide everyday Afghans with basic democratic entitlements.

The upcoming U.S. presidential election in 2020 will likely bring more changes for the future of Afghanistan policy. Both President Obama and President Trump campaigned on the removal of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and both have walked back their commitments with increased deployments and attacks in the country.

Furthermore, the U.S. public has largely lost interest in the future of Afghanistan. In a poll by Rasmussen Reports, only 58% of those likely to vote knew the U.S. was still involved in counterinsurgency and military operations in Afghanistan.[141] The relevance of foreign policy in Afghanistan that existed in the early 2000s is no longer present. The possibility of troop deployments to Iran has taken over media concerns.

The sincerity of Taliban peace negotiations is unknown. Some experts believe Taliban perceptions of exhaustion and disunity signify genuine interest in the peace process.[142] However, the Taliban have shown that they can capitalize on the safety of cease-fire agreements to return better trained and equipped to continue their ideological jihad. Additionally, although moderate members of the Taliban may engage in peace agreements, the more radical and fundamentalist members may continue to bring terror to Afghanistan.

Regardless of the outcomes of the continuing peace process, the U.S. must learn from their experiences in Afghanistan. U.S. forces entered Afghanistan will relatively zero understanding of the complex landscape of the Afghan country and will no plan for the long-term future of the country. The use of outdated doctrine and strategies, applied to a misunderstood Afghan situation resulted in the loss of thousands of American lives.

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141 "Do Voters Know We're Still At War With Afghanistan?" Rasmussen Reports, July 30, 2018, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/afghanistan/do_voters_know_we_re_still_at_war_with_afghanistan.

142 Farrell, "Unbeatable," 75.

Future planning for military engagements, specifically those involving counterinsurgency, must look to the failures of Afghanistan for guidance. Mao's handbook on guerrilla warfare has remained applicable for over half a century and has helped to defeat conventional militaries, including the U.S. for just as long due to an inability to learn from insurgent behaviors.

The U.S. must learn to act swiftly and efficiently, to adapt to changes in operational tempo, and to consider the cultural nuances of host nations much as insurgents do. Until those challenges can be matched with effective and evolutionary military doctrine, the U.S. will continue to fail against insurgents on the battlefield.

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